"FAITH AS ADVENTURE"
Genesis 12:1-4
John 5:1-9
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Our religion is so staid, so comfortable, so much a part of the general status quo, that the words faith and adventure just don't seem to have much to do with each other. We take our religion with varying degrees of seriousness and live it with varying levels of commitment, but one thing it is not for most of us is an adventure. Adventure assumes an element of danger and risk, striking out into an unknown situation. Adventure means the possibility of excitement, new experiences, new faces, new relationships. More often then not adventure means moving from one place to another; when I think about the word I connect it to being put on a train to Philadelphia when I was seven years old, or traveling across the country alone when I was sixteen. ~~I relate it to spending 24 exciting but threatening hours in Salt Lake City and New Orleans alone, dependent on my self - while on that trip.~~ - this summer - a new definition of adventure - I relate it to packing my family in the car and going on vacation. But mostly you and I experience adventure vicariously, that is to say - second handed, in movies and books and in the private world of fantasy. And for most of us it takes a bit of imagination to relate the idea of adventure with the idea of religious faith in any way whatever.

We have not been helped much by the Church and its institutional life. ~~That seems to me rather clearly as I looked for a Hymn that might express the idea that faith; active-tion, following Christ are essentially adventurous activities.~~ There is not much excitement generated in most churches: in fact, one critic of the institutional church has suggested that putting a follower of Christ in a typical congregation is a little like putting a live chick under a dead hen. ~~I had trouble finding one and never really did - because those sections in the Hymnal are filled with slow, serious, morose melodies that talk about comfort and safety and deliverance - but not at all about adventure.~~

We have been thinking for three Sundays prior ~~this month~~ about a positive concept of salvation, focusing on the idea that God wants us to become whole men, complete, fulfilled. We've thought about Jesus' imperative to his disciples, "You must be perfect". We've talked about Jonathan Livingston Seagull, and the paralytic whom Jesus told to get up and walk. We've concluded that God has said "Yes" to life in Jesus Christ and that we may say "Yes" to our lives.

We've recalled that the Biblical idea of salvation is to be delivered from something; in the Old Testament, from your enemies; in the New Testament, from sin and death. But that in both instances being saved also means to become something you were not before.

Man's response to God's gift of salvation - whether we mean his saving of Israel at the Red Sea, or his saving of all men in Jesus Christ - is faith. Faith is man's answer to God's gracious activity. Faith is the act of seizing, claiming, celebrating and living the salvation God has given. And that stance - the stance of faith, I am suggesting - is essentially an adventure.

And yet I know, even as I say it, that I have some convincing to do. Because the fact is that faith for us means a kind of passive assumption that everything will be O.K. someday: or it means giving intellectual assent to certain theological concepts: or, in the words of a schoolboy quoted by Leslie Weatherhead "Faith is believing what you know to be untrue." (~~The Christian Agnostic, P. 23~~1)

Faith as adventure? Let's look.

Faith is first defined in the Bible by the venerable patriarch Abraham. Jews and Christians know him as the "Father of the Faith". His credentials? He wasn't much of a theologian: Abraham simply sensed that God wanted him to gather up his belongings and his immediate family and pack off into the desert. It meant cutting all ties with the familiar and comfortable status quo. It involved making a hard decision and then carrying it out with only God's promise that there was a future out there for him somewhere. That promise - that there would be a land ~~out there~~ for ~~you~~ him - that ~~your~~ his family ~~will~~ would become a great nation - was Abraham's salvation. And his willingness to say "Yes" to the adventure, to pack up and go, is the primal Biblical model of faith. One writer ~~James Wharton~~ put it this way: "Faith for Abraham was no mere exercise in believing impossible or unlikely things. For him, faith was trust translated into specific action at considerable cost." ("~~The Protestant Hour~~, ~~October 5, 1972, P.~~ 6)

Centuries later a similar incident happened involving Jesus Christ and a crippled man, and again faith is expressed in terms of adventure. I've always been intrigued by this story - so let's think for a moment about it.

The scene is the pool called Bethzatha in Jeresalem, a very beautiful setting archeologists believe they have recovered in deep excavations beneath Jeresalem's church of St. Anne. The pool was surrounded by ballistrades and five porches - and its waters -

which were fed by an underground spring were believed to have curative powers. When the spring began to flow the waters became troubled and turned a rusty red color. Pagan superstition had it that a local deity was responsible for troubling the waters and that the first person into the pool following the disturbance would be healed of whatever physical problems he happened to have. The Jews translated the Pagan Deity into the Angel of the Lord and retained the belief in the healing power of the pool.

And so it was that the five porches around the pool were filled with people, crippled, old, sick-waiting, some alone, some with their families, for the disturbance. And when it happened we can imagine the frantic scrambling and limping and crawling to get into the water.

Some - the severely crippled, for instance, never had a chance. Always pushed aside at the last minute, they never made it to the water in time. One man, the Gospel of John relates, had been there for 38 years. We can admire his tenacity and yet we can deduce that if he hadn't made it in all those years the odds were that he wasn't ever going to make it.

Along came a stranger, a kind and loving man from Nazareth, known as a healer. And instead of offering to help the crippled man into the water he asked a rather unkind and inappropriate question: "Do you want to be healed"? Well, of course the man wanted to be healed - he had invested 38 years of his life pursuing that very goal.

And yet, perhaps that's not the whole truth about this man. There was, after all, something to be said for lying on the porch. It wasn't posh, by any means. But it was secure and safe. It was cool in the shadows and a man could count on the sympathy of passers-by for food and alms. I think it's at least a possibility that somewhere in the course of those 38 years this man had made a bargain with fate, that he had made his peace with the status quo, that he had long since given up any real interest in making it to the pool on time, even though he went through the motions every time the disturbance occurred. I think it's at least possible that this man had settled in for the duration and was disguising the truth about himself by engaging in the ritual of waiting beside the pool. I think Jesus saw that immediately and when he asked the man if he wanted to be healed he meant "Do you really want to be healed?"

Jesus told the man to take up his pallet and walk, which is what he did. And if we're correct in our deductions about him, it would have been a great adventure with lots of danger, risk and uncertainty.

To have faith, to grasp and live one's salvation in the Bible is to change - to change one's attitude and self assessment and one's behavior. It is to leave old attitudes, old behavior patterns, and sometimes old places, behind and strike out into something new. Abraham and the man beside the pool had to part ways with the status quo and do something they weren't sure they wanted to do. And I'm suggesting that they are two prototypes of the word faith.

And yet everything in us seems to resist that kind of radical departure. Things may not be as good as we wish, but the status-quo always appears preferable to the unknown, the new, the adventuresome. I am reminded of a story my father told me and insisted was true, although I don't think it was. In any case it involved a Railroad engineer with whom he worked and who every day of his life ate bologna sandwiches for lunch. And every day he would complain about the bologna sandwiches, how tired he was of them, how he hated the taste of bologna. One day, the story went, my father asked why he didn't tell his wife and suggest cheese or peanut butter. And the crusty old engineer told my father to mind his own business: he had been making his own lunch for years.

True or not, it illustrates the way we use rituals to hide the truth about ourselves and to avoid the threat of adventure - even in matters so insignificant as a new choice of sandwich.

Think for a minute about Marriage and Family. We are unaminous in two assertions: one, that marriage and family are the most important relationships which we experience and that a priority item for all of us is to have joyful, healthy, satisfying marriages and families: two, we can agree that both marriage and family are under considerable pressure today from a culture that is rapidly changing. But the third assertion, which ought to follow - namely, that we need to give loving and nuturing attention to marriage and family relationships is not one about which we generate much steam. And why? Because to work at a marital relationship - to really try to make a family a joyful, life giving entity involves a certain element of risk and danger. It can be an adventure. It might

mean joining a group, attending a class, seeking professional help: it might mean changing attitudes, schedules, behavior patterns: it might mean altering familiar ideas of what it means to be a man or woman: it might possibly mean being honest about one's own feelings: it might even mean altering traditional and comfortable definition of roles. But I don't see it happening: I see a lot of ritualized hiding from reality: I see a lot of hand wringing about the family and a lot of complaining about marriage - and that's all. It's almost as if we prefer the misery of the status quo rather than the potential adventure of growing as men and women.

Or think about the whole matter of personal goals in life. The philosopher William James once observed that people contract "the habit of inferiority to our full self", and as a result "the human individual lives usually far within his limits: he possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use. He energizes below his maximum and he behaves below his optimum". That's true of most of us, I think. There is no one here who doesn't have a dream, a goal: a skill to be refined, courses to be taken, travel to be experienced, a vocation to be chosen, or perhaps just a stack of books to be read. But the status quo with all its dead weight sets in. We go through the motions of pursuing the goal, but it's become a ritual with us. While I was in Divinity School I knew a student, a middle-age man with five children, who quit his job as a Civil Engineer and moved into cramped student housing in order to become something he had always wanted to be - a minister of the Gospel. His future was unknown: the risks and dangers of his adventure were daily matters with him and his family. But I haven't known many like him.

Or think finally about our experience of religious faith itself. We're committed to the Church, more or less. And yet, when we're honest, we can admit that we wish our faith had more meaning, more vitality, more undergirding power. And sometimes we use the rituals of religion to hide from any real adventure of faith.

That idea is incorporated regularly in a very popular newspaper cartoon series in America today. Charles Schultz incorporates the idea regularly into his Peanuts cartoon. Linus drags his blanket around with him as a source of security - when it is in the washing machine he experiences severe anxiety: and when it seems to be lost he is in a mild panic. Life seems impossible without it. One time Lucy, the eternal protagonist, tells him "Linus, you can't depend on that blanket forever. Sooner or later you'll find that out."

Remark: Ostensibly the subject matter is the antics of several small children + dog - but in reality the cartoon is with the foibles and inconsistencies among adults - much of it heavily religious

And the next picture shows Linus with the blanket over his head extending all the way to the floor.

Well, the comfortable rituals of institutional religion sometimes serve the same purpose as Linus's blanket. They provide a sense of security: they help us to avoid any adventure of faith, any step into the unknown. ~~It's almost a cliché for people to say - "I don't get much out of prayer anymore" while continuing to engage in liturgical prayer ac~~ Praying can be empty ritual w/o meaning before meals - bed time - same trad. phrases - same prayers we've heard and taught ourselves to repeat: very little of "us" in them I would suggest that prayer will continue to be an empty ritual until we risk something - until we risk exposing our discomfort and embarrassment: ~~until we stop having Uncle Norman recite the grace at the grandmother and let the boy saying grace in a group get about doing something~~ Share w/ God our doubts + despair - our true joys - even our anger — until we do so honest wrestling with God ourselves: ~~until we stop insisting on including a little prayer in the public schools and~~ start struggling with the dangerous idea that there is a God who hears us and has something to say back to us.

Do we dare to engage in honest Bible study - or are we content with the empty ritual of adorning our sanctuary with it, and listening politely as the minister reads the text for the day? Do we dare the adventure of honest sacrifice - or are we willing to ~~make the compromise~~ be satisfied with the ritual of comfortable stewardship at ~~two dollars a week?~~ a few pennies a week

Do we dare to take Jesus Christ seriously? To do so means to grow. It means to feel more: ~~to risk being given a bleeding heart~~: it involves becoming sensitive to the hurts of our brothers and sisters: it leads inevitably to a stance of commitment to the welfare of others and involvement in the world where the common welfare is determined.

— To do so is an adventure...

God calls us to that. In Jesus Christ he calls us away from the status quo and to a life of adventure. I found recently a series of small reflections that attempt to paraphrase Jesus' teachings: the one on Life says it all:

> "Let not the night find you still waiting
> to live, still too cautious to invest your
> life, still not ready to begin the task of
> becoming. For life waits not, it hurries by
> and whispers 'Come along!' YOu can either join
> the celebration or simply stand and stare

as all your todays become yesterdays, all your tomorrows race along the horizon into twilight and leave you with a torn parcel of memories wondering what might have happened if you had really dared to be alive". (~~Alive Now, Summer 1972, P. 44~~)

That's what God said to Abraham back on the dark edges of history. That's what Jesus said to that pathetic man who had been avoiding life for 38 years. And it is precisely what he says to us. Take up your pallet and walk. You are saved. God really cares how you live and that you live to the fullest extent of your possibilities. Be open to the adventure of faith."

How do you answer? AMEN

Father, the status quo is so very comforting, and we're not anxious to experience the risks of a new adventure. And yet, we confess to an emptiness - a sense of incompleteness. Give us courage to dare: give us spirit to walk into an unknown future: help us to hear your Son who keeps insisting that we "pick up our bed and walk". AMEN

Alistair Atherton- presentation